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SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL MEETS FOR FIRST TIME
SINCE 1998

Classified By: DPO GREG MARCHESE FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment. On August 26, the Palestinian National Council (PNC) convened for the first time since 1998 to fill six seats vacated by deaths on the PLO Executive Committee (PLO/EC). Three of the new members return to the seats traditionally held by their small factions. Two others, Sa'eb Erekat and Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala'a), are Fatah stalwarts. The final seat went to independent Hanan Ashrawi. Abu Mazen's speech at the event focused on the importance of a settlement freeze to restarting negotiations (though he was careful to say this was not a precondition). He also said elections in the West Bank and Gaza are the only alternative if factional reconciliation talks remain stalemated. Coming on the heels of the Fatah General Congress, the PNC session marks the second significant step this month toward revitalizing key Palestinian institutions. End Summary and Comment.

¶2. (U) Abu Mazen convened an August 26 "extraordinary" session of the PNC at the Mugata'a to fill six vacant seats on the eighteen-member PLO/EC, the organization's highest decision-making body. The Consul General, Polchief and Polspec represented the USG at the inaugural session. The meeting, the PNC's first since a 1998 session in Gaza to amend the PLO charter, was prompted when the early August death of PLO/EC member Samir Ghosheh left the committee on the edge of losing a quorum.

After Eleven Years, PNC Gets Off To A Rusty Start

¶3. (SBU) The session got off to a somewhat disorganized start, despite the presence of television cameras and several dozen diplomats and observers. The first ninety minutes were taken up by a roll call. A number of the 310 accredited delegates voiced concerns when their names were not called; still others raised the absence of some overseas members. Order returned after PNC Speaker Salim Zanon noted that neither he nor Abu Mazen appeared on the inaccurate roll either.

¶4. (SBU) The remainder of the opening session was devoted to Abu Mazen's remarks on the role of the PLO, Fatah, negotiations and reconciliation. A few highlights:

---On the Roadmap, Abu Mazen said the current effort to resume negotiations should be based on all sides (including Arab governments) meeting their commitments under the Roadmap's first phase. "We have undertaken all that was asked of us, in contrast to Israel, which has not committed to... stop settlements. While we do not place preconditions (on negotiations), we want Israel to meet its commitments," he said.

---Abu Mazen categorically rejected negotiations over the concept of a state with provisional borders, departing from his prepared text to say, "even though this is in phase two

of the Roadmap, it is not obligatory, but optional. And we reject it."

---With regard to negotiations themselves, he claimed that discussions in Annapolis had made progress on the issue of territory, by determining "once and for all" that the occupied territories include Gaza and the West Bank "in its entirety," including Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, and "No Man's Land."

---Abu Mazen praised the "major efforts exerted by the U.S. administration and President Obama personally for the sake of arriving at a real political solution" to the conflict.

---Finally, on reconciliation, he decried the lack of progress in negotiations. Any solution must result in a lifting of the "siege," Abu Mazen noted. If stalemate continues, he said, the sole alternative is to hold presidential and legislative elections on the basis of full proportional representation, under Arab and international supervision, in both Gaza and the West Bank.

Debate Over New Members Stretches Into the Night

¶5. (C) In a closed session that ran until 4:00 a.m. on August 27, PNC members held a contentious debate on how to fill two of the six vacant seats, according to several participants. There was little controversy over candidates for the seats traditionally held by the smaller factions, and the People's Party's Hanna Amireh, the National Struggle Front's Ahmad Majdalani, and FIDA (Palestinian Democratic Union)'s Saleh

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Rifat were approved without a vote. PLO Senior Negotiator Sa'eb Erekat, who had the strong backing of Abu Mazen, was approved as well.

¶6. (C) However, debate over the final two seats grew contentious, according to our sources. The Fatah Central Committee (FCC)'s pick for the "independent" seat - Ziad Abu Amr - withdrew his candidacy after encountering resistance. In subsequent elections, former FCC member Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala'a) and independent Palestinian Legislative Council Member Hanan Ashrawi won the final two seats. Coming on the heels of Abu Ala'a's surprising loss of his FCC seat at the Fatah General Congress earlier this month, the victory represented a return to relevance for the longtime PLO negotiator.

¶7. (SBU) The first formal meeting of the new Executive Committee will occur within days, contacts said. In addition, Abu Mazen reportedly sent a message to PLO/EC member-in-exile Farouq Qaddumi that he would be automatically dismissed from the PLO if he fails to attend three consecutive sessions.

Biographical Information

¶8. (SBU) Bios on the new PLO/EC members, and a list of existing members, follow below.

New members:

(1) Dr. Sa'eb Erekat (Fatah)

Born in Jericho on April 1955. He obtained MA in Political Science/ International Relations from San Francisco State University in 1979 where was elected president of the Arab Students Association. Erekat returned to the West Bank in 1979 and became lecturer of Political Science at An-Najah College. He won a scholarship to the doctoral program at Bradford University in UK from where he graduated with PhD in Peace Studies in 1983. He was placed under house arrest during the early years of first Intifada and he was banned from traveling abroad from 1985-1990 for pro-Fatah

activities. He was Vice-chair of the Palestinian negotiation team to the 1991 Madrid Peace conference and subsequently to the Washington talks in 1992-93. He joined Haidar Abdul Shafi and Hanan Ashrawi in resigning as delegates to Washington when the Oslo Accords were made public; later he reconciled with Yasser Arafat and became the only member of the "internal" leadership to join Arafat's inner circle after the establishment of the PA. Erekat served as Minister of Local Government from 1994-2003. In 1994, he was appointed chairman of the Palestinian negotiation delegation. He served as Head of the Central Election Commission during the first Palestinian elections in 1996, and was also elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council that same year (from Jericho). Erekat led negotiations on the Hebron Agreement in 1997 and the Wye River Memorandum in 1998. He also participated in the 2000 Camp David and 2001 Taba talks. Erekat became Minister of Negotiation Affairs under then-PM Mahmoud Abbas in April 2003 and Minister of Negotiation Affairs in the subsequent government of Ahmad Qurei (November 2003-February 2005). He was reelected as a PLC member in the January 2006 elections and won a seat on the Fatah Central Committee during the August 2009 Fatah General Congress.

(2) Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala,a) (ran as an independent, but Fatah-affiliated)

Born in Abu Dis in 1937. He joined Fatah in 1968 and accompanied Arafat to Damascus in 1983 then to Tunis in 1984.

He became the head of the PLO Economic Department in Tunis and member of several financial sub-committees. Abu Ala'a was elected a member of FCC at the Fifth Congress in August 1989, and later as a member of the PLO Central Council and the PNC. He was sent by Arafat to Washington to serve as member of the PLO Steering Committee, which advised the official Palestinian negotiators in 1992 talks. He also served as chief negotiator for the Oslo channel, and eventually initiated the DoP on August 1993. He served as the managing director of PECJAR since its creation in 1993. He was appointed PA Minister of Economy and Trade and later of Industry (1994-96). Abu Ala'a led the negotiation team towards the 1995 Oslo II Agreement and was the Palestinian representative on the Steering Committee that monitored its implementation; he was elected PLC member for Jerusalem in January 1996 elections (was number 1 on the list); elected speaker of the PLC in 1996 and served in that post until 2003. He remained a chief negotiator in Palestinian Israeli talks. After the resignation of Mahmoud Abbas as a PM, Qurei was appointed Prime Minister in the Palestinian Authority in

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October 2003 Emergency Government and the subsequent new government in November 2003, where he also held the positions of Information and Waqf minister. He was confirmed as Prime Minister in February 2005 until after the January 2006 PLC elections.

(3) Hanna Amireh - People Party

Born in Ramallah in 1948; moved to Jerusalem with his family in 1949. He became an Associate of Arts at Birzeit University in 1971. He was jailed for five years 1971-76. Member of the People's Party Politburo since 1991; member of the Advisory Committee to the Palestinian delegation to the 1991 Madrid Peace conference; PNC member since 1996. He was elected as Secretary General of the People's Party (together with Mustafa Barghouti and Abdel Majid Hamdan) at the 3rd People party convention in Ramallah in October 1998. PLO Executive Committee observer since 2001. He received an MA in International Security from the Warnborough University (UK) in 2002. He works as columnist and political analyst in a number of local newspapers and magazines.

(4) Dr. Ahmad Majdalani - National Struggle Front

Born in 1956 in Damascus, Majdalani holds a PhD in Political Economy from Social Sciences Academy in Sofia in Bulgaria.

He is a member of the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF) politburo and of the PLO National and Central Councils. Majdalani is also a professor of philosophy and cultural studies at Birzeit University and a former cabinet minister. He was previously PLO ambassador to Romania (2008) and now serves as Minister of Culture in the current government.

(5) Saleh Rafat - FIDA

Born in Arrabeh (near Jenin) in 1945, Rafat studied at Algeria University until 1967. He was arrested in Algeria after revolutionary leader Ahmad Ben Bella was deposed in 1965, and returned to the West Bank to take part in establishing the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). He joined the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) after its breakaway from the PFLP in 1969 and served as its official spokesperson as well as its treasurer. He has served as a PNC member since 1969 and member of the PLO Central Council. He was captured in Jordan in 1971 but was released in 1973 as part of a general amnesty for DFLP members. He supported Yasser Abed Rabbo split from the DFLP in March 1990 and was among the founders of FIDA (the Palestinian Democratic Union); he returned to the PA in 1995 and was elected as Secretary General of FIDA in February 1996 and formally confirmed into the post in January 2000.

(6) Hanan Ashrawi - Independent

Born in Ramallah in 1946, Ashrawi received her BA and MA degrees in English literature from the American University in Beirut. After earning her Ph.D. in Medieval and Comparative Literature from the University of Virginia, she returned to the West Bank to establish the English Department at Bir Zeit University. In 1974 she founded the Bir Zeit University Legal Aid Committee. Her political profile grew during the first intifada (1988) when she joined the Intifada Political Committee, serving on its Diplomatic Committee until 1993. From 1991-1993 she served as the official Spokesperson of the Palestinian negotiating delegation at the Madrid and Washington talks. After the formation of the PA, she served as minister of education from 1996-1998, when she left to form the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy. She was elected to the PLC from the Jerusalem district in 1996 and re-elected in 2006 as a member of the "Third Way" list.

Existing members:

- (7) Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) - Fatah
- (8) Farouq Qaddumi (Abu Lutuf) - Fatah
- (9) Yasser Abed Rabbo - Independent
- (10) Tayseer Khaled (Mohammad Sa,adeh Odeh) - DFLP
- (11) Abdul Rahim Malouh - PFLP
- (12) As,ad Abdul Rahman - Independent
- (13) Ghassan Al-Shaka,a - Fatah
- (14) Zakaria Al-Agha - Fatah
- (15) Zuhdi Nashashibi - Independent
- (16) Riad al Khudari - Independent
- (17) Ali Ishaq - Palestine Arab Liberation Front
- (18) Mahmoud Isamel - Arab Liberation Front

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